

Interview with Samuel Berg

This tape recording registers an interview with Dr. Samuel Berg in the late 1950's covering, for the most part, his recollections of Roseville forty to fifty years before.

Interviewer- Dr. Berg, let's start this with some early statistics.

Berg- I was born in New York City in 1898, and my family moved to Roseville in 1906, so that I was 8 years old at the time. We lived for four years on West Market Street (it was Warren Street at that time) and Second Street, the north west corner. In 1910 we moved to 9th Avenue corner So. 13th Street, the north east corner.

Interviewer- Your father was a pharmacist?

Berg- Yes, he was licensed in 1900 in New York State to practice pharmacy. He served as a pharmacy clerk until he saved enough money to open his own store on West Market Street. After four years, there, he opened a drug store on 9th Avenue, and maintained it until his death in 1942.

Interviewer- What are your early recollections?

Berg- When you requested this interview, I wrote down recollections as they came to mind, and naturally there is no sequence. Furthermore, they will be limited to events of general interest.

My very first impression of Roseville is that we lived in a tough neighborhood. There were several gangs, and the one nearest us was called the Camden Street gang. An example. Most homes were lighted with kerosine lamps, and kerosine was sold in grocery stores. The grocer plugged the spout of the cans with a potato. Sometimes a child would be on the way home with a can of kerosine, and one of these tough guys would grab it out of her hand, take a mouthful of kerosine, strike a match on the seat of his pants, hold it in front of his mouth and blow the kerosine out in a strong spray. There would be an immense flame, very impressive.

On fourth of July these fellows would pull out a small cannon, load it with powder, place a wooden box over it and blow it into pieces sky high.

Most cooking was done in stoves with coal, so that even on fourth of July there were plenty of boxes.

Another episode. When these fellows threw snow balls, very often the snow was packed around a lump of coal. I recall a gentleman, a handsome man wearing a heavy blue coat and a derby and a cane. He made a wonderful target for these rowdies, which would be pointless except for the fact that the man turned around ever so casually as if to stop them with an imperious look and was hit in the eye. There was a gush of blood and the man fell to the ground. Ever since seeing that,

I have had the utmost hatred for gansters, and a terrible fear whenever I see bo2ys throwing stones or other objects even in so-called fun.

I recall a political parade up West Market Street; I think it was at the time of Taft's election. Many of the paraders carried short torches with red and white and green flames. These torches were on short wooden pegs which could be stuck into the ground. But on this occasion the Camden Street gang got sort of mixed up with the paraders and pretty soon some of these pegs were stuck into some chests. That was strong stuff for a timid youngster to see.

They used to congregate on the steps into the house, and for a time my father had some trouble with them. But you know, in a short time, whenever my mother came out and walked down those steps, they would all stand up and doff their caps and greet her like real gentlemen. That also impressed me.

Interviewer- Perhaps that is one reason your father moved to 13th Street.

Berg- Perhaps. These stabbings I just spoke about reminds me of the City Hospital ambulance. It was a four wheel affair with a black canvas top pulled by a single horse. City Hospital was just up the hill from our house, and if the ambulance came down that hill, it was with considerable speed. The horse raced at full speed, his head stretched forward and it and his tail rearward, the drive in the front seat leaning forward, holding his arms way forward, a whip in his hand and giving rein to the horse, urging him on with Gee / Gee /, clanging the gong all the while, the ambulance swaying from side to side. That was quite a sight. They would race right across West Market Street - there was practically no auto traffic then, mostly trollies and horses and wagons.

Incidentally, when I began internship with Dr. Martland in 1922, the morgue attendant was a fellow by the name of Harry Moran. I told him about my recollection of the old ambulance, and it turned out that he was the ambulance driver at the time I lived on 2nd. Street. Harry Moran was quite a character, and in 40 years at City Hospital came to know every staff doctor and intern. He retired on pension in 1942. When I left for army service that year, Harry promised to send me stories about every physician he could recall. His letters reached me all over the S.W. Pacific, and they are the ones I placed between covers and presented to the Library.

Interviewer- What about your activities after school?

Berg- Well, in winter there was ice skating in Branch Brook Park. It seems to me we had anywhere from 3 to 6 weeks of skating every winter, regularly. And there was sleighing, plenty of it, because the only traffic was horses and sleds, no

autos, and the snow was just packed down, never plowed to one side or carted away. Everyone had his own flexible flyer. The nicest sleighing was on Dickerson Street, down hill from West Market Street to Bergen Street. They had many bob sleds then, a long board with each end fixed onto a sled. From 6 to 10 people would either sit on this board or lie prone on it, and away they would go. Traffic was held up at each cross street, and allowed to pass at intervals.

We did quite some bicycling - again safe because of very little auto traffic. We used to ride to Pine Brook to swim in the Passaic River there. And sand lot baseball. Ours was on the block between Central and 9th Avenues, between so. 15th and 16th Streets. It was vacant except for a few houses at the 9th Avenue end. It was called the Guinea Farm, for a rather obvious reason. Roseville was mostly farm land until cut up into building lots.

A few of the fellows who played there made good in pro and semi-pro baseball. I guess my brother was the best of the guinea farm group. He played in the majors for 17 years, mostly in the American League with Chicago, Cleveland, Boston and Washington.

Interviewer- That's the well-known Moe Berg, isn't it? The one who has the reputation of being the smartest man who ever played baseball, a graduate of Princeton, speaks 6 or 8 languages, and is a graduate of Columbia Law School.

Berg- That's the one. We used to go to the bicycle races at the Veledrome. You must get someone to tell you about that, since the world center of bicycle racing was right here in Newark.

The Veledrome was first on the south side of So. Orange Avenue just west of the Garden State Parkway, now Irvington Park. It moved across the way to where the Food Fair is now located. That drew more than the Newark baseball club with Iron Joe McGinnitty, who used to win two games in one day. I can still see Frank Kraemer, Alf Grenda, Jackie Clarke and many others.

After the Veledrome moved to the opposite side of So. Orange Avenue, the original site became Electric Park, with all sorts of amusements. But I remember best the balloon ascensions every Sunday afternoon. A huge balloon was suspended over a huge wood fire, and it ballooned out with hot air. It was held down by several men holding ropes tied to its lower end. When the pull was strong enough, all let go at a signal and the balloon went up, taking along a parachute from which was suspended a man on a trapeze. At an elevation of about a thousand feet, he would do turns on it, suspend himself on the bar with his knees, etc. Then he would release the parachute and down he would float.

Interviewer- What happened to the balloon?

Berg- It would float up for a little distance, then turn over very slowly, the hot smoke would pour out of its opening, and down it would fall, very slowly. It was recovered for reuse.

Interviewer- What about the movies in those days?

Berg- Oh yes. They were just plain stores, with a screen at the far end, and folding chairs placed in rows. There was one on Orange Street, between 13th Street and Hedden Place, right near Rosenstein's saloon, an old landmark. There was one in a store on West Market Street, on the south side, two doors from Bergen Street, now a liquor store. Then real movie houses were constructed. There was the Criterion on Central Avenue near 9th Street, next door to #11 Fire House. It is now a garage. You can still see the large, painted Greek mask representing the theatre over the entrance. Then came the Central Theatre and then the Tivoli. The Plaza Theatre of 7th Street near Orange was originally a legitimate playhouse.

Let me tell you about the first talkies. I saw and heard that in the store on Orange Street. Two people would stand under the screen, reading their parts from script, with one eye on the screen for timing. It didn't last long. They had difficulty reading by the light of the movie, and if they stumbled, they never could make up lost time. There was no coordination.

Interviewer- If I recall rightly, you told me once about an outdoor movie.

Berg- Yes, it was on Central Avenue and West Market Street, behind the bank. The empty lot is still there - imagine that, an empty lot in the heart of Roseville, for more than fifty years. You can see that it has a slope, just right for placing rows of seats down the grade. The seats were soap boxes and boards placed on boxes. Come to think of it, all boxes in those days were wood; there was no corrugated cardboard. So there were plenty of wooden boxes. Well, outdoor movies could not go on before dark, and that's just when the mosquitoes performed. That's what killed outdoor movies.

My father used to sell gallons of citronella every night. That was rubbed on the face and hands to keep the mosquitoes away. People used to burn punk also. That movie was run by Harry Stevens, the realtor.

I recall another recreation. We used to go chestnutting where the Garden State Parkway runs between Central Avenue and Main Street. That area was dense woods of massive trees; there was a dirt road through it, as I recall, and it later became Oraton Parkway. We cut big sticks and threw them up into the trees to knock down the chestnuts in burrs.

I recall the circus - we still lived on 2nd Street, so it must have been about 1909. It was in a tent pitched in a vacant block on Sussex Avenue and Duryea Street, where the Essex County Youth Headquarters building stands now. They had a big parade of many varieties of animals, many elephants, a calliope and clowns. There was a row of three story houses where the Essex County Vocational School is located, and a man boosted me up onto the window sill and someone held me there to watch the parade. That's all I recall of that circus. It was located in later years on a lot at Sussex Avenue and First Street, where the Whitehead & Hoag building was erected, and where the Good Deal Food Market stands.

There used to be huge bonfires in that same lot on Halloween. Wood boxes, doors, outhouses (yes, there were outhouses still in Roseville), anything made of wood, furniture, etc, piles two stories high. Kerosine was poured on it and a match applied. Flames shot hundreds of feet into the air.

I love fires and fire engines. How can any modern fire engine compare with the steam pumper drawn by three horses? If you happened to be near the fire house when the bell clanged, you would have seen three horses dash out of their stalls to their places under the collars of their harness. If the signal indicated a fire in that district, the collars came down and were snapped shut in a few seconds and away they would go. Before the engine left the fire house, kerosine was dashed on the pile of wood in the fire box and ignited. By the time they were a block away, smoke and sparks were belching out of the chimney. And how those horses ran; just like the pictures of the chariot race in Ben Hur. A real thrilling sight.

You know, it's a funny thing, I don't recall the hose carts or hook and ladders drawn by horses - oh yes I do - yes I do. But they were motorized early. It took quite some time, I suppose, before they learned to mesh in the auto engine with the pumper.

Let me say a few words about illness and funerals. The average length of life has increased tremendously in the past fifty years because of the marked drop in infant mortality. Many babies died from infectious diarrhea, and it was not uncommon to see 6 or 8 baby funerals on a Sunday pass by our house on 9th Avenue on the way to Fairmount or Holy Sepulchre Cemeteries. Babies were carried in small white hearses, adults in large black ones, drawn by horses. There were many Italian funerals, and they were in accordance with old world custom. A band followed the hearse, on foot, and the mourners marched behind the band. It was a rather quiet procession, with the only sound that of the drummer tapping out a roll. Every few blocks the band would strike up a dirge. That would be repeated at intervals. Imagine walking from the Third ward to East Orange in the

hot August aun, especially the parents in deep grief.

There were the German bands, oh, about 4 to 6 musicians. They were the typical corpulent Germans, round faces, big bellies, crew cut hair, playing wind instruments. They would play a number or two, and one of them would go around with a hat collecting from the standers by or trying to catch coins thrown from windows. Some fresh kids used to suck lemons in front of them to make their mouths water, and then there would be a chase.

There was the organ grinder pulling a piano around on two wheels. It was played by turning a crank. Often it was a typical Italian and his wife or daughter, dressed in colorful native costumes. Sometimes they had a monkey dressed in a little jacket and wearing a hat cocked on one side of the head, to me looking just like a monkey bell hop. He would prance around picking up coins, or hopping from person to person with his hat in his hand to gather up a collection.

The street lights were welsbach burning gas. The lamplighter walked his beat. At dusk, he would use a long rod to turn the gas cock on, then turn the rod half circle with a flaming wax taper to ignite the gas. At daybreak he would walk his beat and turn off the gas.

For a while Roseville had its own newspaper, what is called a throwaway. It was called the Roseville Citizen, and was delivered to every house on Saturday, when there was no school. I used to deliver them. We got a quarter for two hours. Just imagine if I kept one copy of each issue, how valuable they would be.

Just for the record, let me list the drug stores in those days. The oldest was Sayre's at the Point, where West Market and Orange Streets meet; the building is now occupied by a liquor store. Then there was Foster's, on Roseville Avenue corner Orange Street. He had the elite trade, later moved to Glen Ridge. Hagny was on Central Avenue corner of 5th Street. Broch was on Central Avenue corner First Street. Silpe was on West Market between Morris Avenue and Hunterdon Street. Maring was on Orange Street corner 5th, later 4th. And my father was on 9th Avenue corner 13th Street.

The area where the City Stadium is located used to be the city garbage dumps. Someone should tell about Silver Lake.

I used to deliver medicines all over Roseville, by foot and on bicycle. One of the chores I disliked was calling people to the telephone. In those days only doctors and stores had phones. If you wanted to call the doctor or a store, or someone who might have a phone, you paid my father a nickel, went to the

phone hanging on yhe wall, put the receiver to your ear and turned the crank. Then you would give the number to the operator. The part I didn't like was calling people to the phone, sometimes 4 blockes away. I could run to call them, but adults or a young lady called by her boy friend couldn't run, and the line was held up for ten or twenty minutes. That was one of our free services.



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